COMMUNICATION ACCESS

for people who have communication disabilities

Guidelines and Resources on Communicating with People who have Communication Disabilities

This booklet is intended to inform businesses and organizations about providing accessible goods and services to people who have communication disabilities, and may be a helpful resource in complying with the customer service standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA).

For information about Ontario's accessibility standards, go to
www.AccessON.ca

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Ce document est également disponible en français.

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The Right to Communicate

Being able to communicate is something many of us take for granted. Speaking and understanding, reading and writing are skills that most of us use every day. We communicate to express our feelings, thoughts and opinions, to ask questions, and to give information. We do this with lots of people and for many different reasons. For example, we might ask for things we want in a store, discuss our medical concerns with a doctor, order a meal in a restaurant, interact with a bank teller about our finances or call a taxi company to book a ride.

Communication is the foundation of much of our lives and a basic human right.

There are thousands of people in Ontario who have disabilities that affect hearing, speaking, reading, writing, and/or understanding, and who use different ways to communicate than people who do not have these disabilities. They have the same rights to communicate as people who speak. These rights are protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code. In addition, accessibility standards under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) will set out legal requirements to ensure that Ontario is accessible to people with disabilities.

The basis of good communication includes a respectful attitude and being a good listener. These basic skills are more important than ever for people who have communication disabilities because their disabilities are typically not well understood by the public.

Jessie Weber, a student at Centennial College, uses her speech generating device to order a latte.

In addition to being a good communicator, you can do a number of practical things to ensure successful interactions when people with communication disabilities use your services.

Andrew Bloomfield types what he wants to say on his device.

Communication Disabilities

When someone has a communication disability, there are four main areas that can be affected. Depending on the nature of the disability, one or more of these areas can be involved. They include a person's ability to:

- Speak
- Understand what others are saying
- Read
- Write

Some of the main types of communication disabilities affect the following:

Hearing

For people who are deaf or have a hearing loss it can be difficult or impossible to hear what a person is saying and sometimes their own speech may not be easily understood.

Movement
People who have disabilities such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis may have difficulty moving their muscles to speak, using gestures, turning pages in a book and writing.

Cognition
People who have intellectual disabilities from birth, or acquire Alzheimer's disease later in life, can have problems remembering, learning, understanding, or problem-solving which can make communication challenging.

Language
People who have aphasia after a stroke or accident may have difficulty understanding others, speaking, reading and writing. The experience of aphasia is similar to being in a foreign country where you know what you want but you have problems understanding others or expressing yourself.

In addition to having communication challenges, many people have multiple disabilities. People who are deafblind have limited hearing and vision. They are unable to use these senses to receive communication. People who have cerebral palsy may be unable to speak, walk or physically manipulate objects. People who have autism may experience challenges learning and using language, as well as interacting with other people.

Regardless of the cause of the disability, all people who have communication disabilities are individuals and communicate in their own ways.

They can also communicate more effectively when they are given appropriate supports. And that's where you come in.

Rebecca Beayni welcomes visitors at the Royal Ontario Museum. She communicates using her communication device, and her assistant helps others to interpret her body language and personal signs.

Communicating in Different Ways

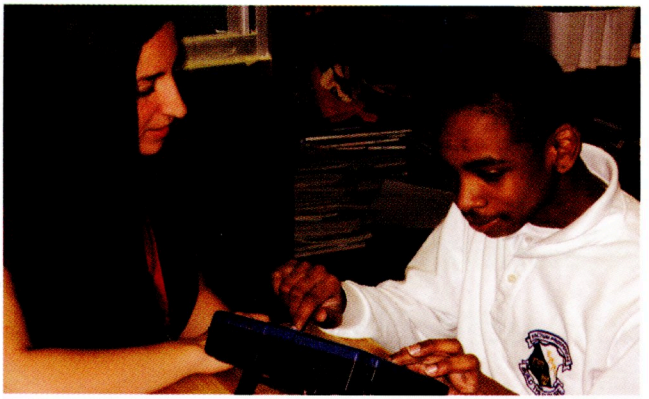
People communicate in different ways because of the type of disability they have as well as their personality, preferences, needs, skills and circumstances. Most individuals use many ways of communicating.

Example: Jean uses some speech, gestures or body language with people who know her well and a speech-generating device over the telephone and when communicating with people who don't know her in the community.

Some ways people communicate:

- Speech (speech may be unclear)
- Body language and facial expressions
- Gestures (e.g., wave to signal goodbye)
- Pointing or looking at objects and people
- Sign Languages (e.g., American Sign Language, Langue des signes Québécoise, Signed Exact English, and Adapted Sign Language)
- Writing, typing or drawing
- Spelling on a letter board, which is usually custom-made for an individual
- Pointing to pictures symbols and/or written words on a communication display, which is custom-made for an individual
- Using a communication device, which is usually obtained through an augmentative and alternative communication clinic.

The best way to find out how a person wants to communicate with you is to ask them.



Janoy Alliman, a student at York Humber High School, uses his communication device to discuss a class project.

For information on augmentative and alternative communication services, clinics and assistive devices, contact the Assistive Devices Program of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC). (See the contact information for all organizations at the end of this booklet).

Communication Barriers

People with communication disabilities can experience major barriers when accessing goods and services in their communities.

"People pat me on the head and talk to me like I'm a child. They assume that because I can't speak, I can't understand or think."

"People don't know what to expect. They feel intimidated because they don't want to look stupid. They usually just ignore me."

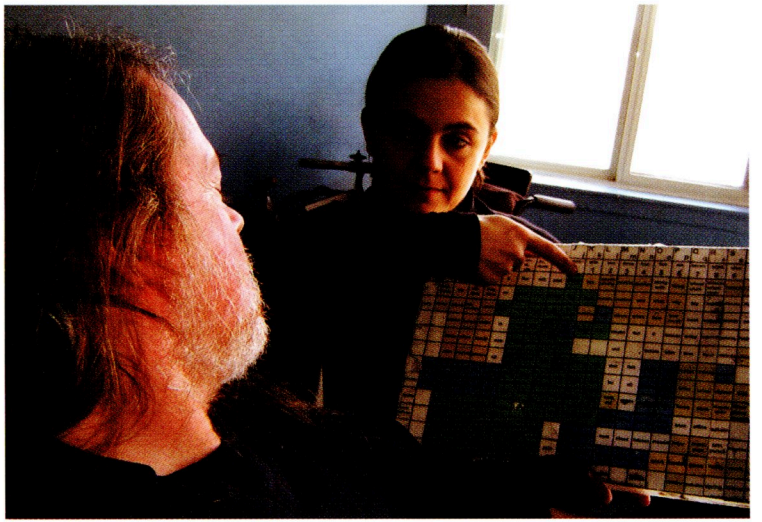
"Most times, people don't let me communicate what I want. They just ask me yes and no questions."

"It takes me much longer to spell out what I want to say than it does for someone to speak. People don't usually make allowances for my slower rate of communicating."

"People have a hard time accepting that I can make my own decisions and consent to my own medical treatments."

"People just hang up when I talk over the phone. My speech is slurred. They think I'm drunk."

"When I started to spell out what I wanted to order, the owner of the fast food restaurant called the police to remove me from the premises."



Aaron Shelbourne, a disability rights advocate, communicates by looking at the words he wants to say on his communication display. His communication assistant interprets his messages for other people.

General Tips for Providing Communication Access

- Be prepared to accept various ways of communicating from people who have communication disabilities (e.g., devices, displays or a communications assistant.)

- Do not assume that a person has difficulty understanding what you are saying. However, be aware that some people do have these additional challenges.

- A person with a communication disability usually needs more time to communicate. Negotiate whether the person wants a longer appointment or multiple short appointments.

- Find a quiet place to talk with minimal distractions so that you can concentrate on the conversation.

- Ask the person: "Is there anything I need to know or do that will assist us when communicating?" You should not ask the person to tell you why they have a communication disability. Focus on finding out what s/he wants you to do to assist.

- Follow the person's instructions and, if necessary, provide any communication supports s/he requires (e.g., more time, a communication assistant, a sign language interpreter or alternate text formats).

Communicating with a Person who Has a Communication Disability

- Remember everyone communicates in different ways. Do not assume you know how the person communicates. Many people have prepared instructions and can tell you what you can do to make communication go smoothly.
- Be patient. Do not rush the conversation.
- Ask one question at a time and wait for a reply.
- Wait for the person to finish his/her message. Do not guess unless the person has given you permission to do so.

- Face the person so that you can pick up on visual clues like the person's body language, facial expressions and gestures.
- Talk directly to the individual, not to the person who may be accompanying him/her.
- Do not speak about the person or refer to the person in the third person when in his/her presence.
- Speak naturally and clearly, using your normal tone, volume and rate.

Everett Nichol is three years old. He uses his communication device when playing with his support facilitator at day care.

If the person uses a communication board or book

- Say, "Please show me how you say "yes."
- Say, "Please show me how you say "no."
- Say, "Please show me how you communicate." The person will either demonstrate or show you his/her communication instructions. These instructions are usually on the person's communication board or on the person's wheelchair tray if he/she uses one.
- If the person uses his/her hand to point to items on a board, say the letter, word or picture out loud that he/she selects.
- If the person uses a way other than pointing, such as an eye gaze to select items on his/her communication board, s/he might want someone to assist you communicating with them.
- It often helps to write down the items that the person selects so that you can keep track of the message.

- If the items that the person selects do not make immediate sense, try putting the words together into a sentence.

Example: The person selects the following items on her board: "Bus - Home - Time." Using these words to guide you, you could suggest, "Do you want to know what time your bus is coming to take you home?" Person responds, "no." Suggest another meaning, such as, "Are you telling me it's time to go home on the bus?" The person responds, "yes."

If the person uses a speech generating device

- Stand/sit in front of the person. Do not look over his/her shoulder or ask how he/she uses the device. You don't need to know.

- Wait for the person to construct his/her full message.

- If you have never heard synthesized speech before, it might be hard for you to understand at first. Tell the person if you don't understand and he/she will either repeat it or indicate that you can come around and read the screen on the device.

If the person's speech is unclear

If the person communicates primarily through speech and his/her speech is difficult to understand, you may find it helpful to:

- Watch how the person says the words.

- Take the time to get used to the person's speech. It gets easier the more you listen and the person may need to repeat what he/she is saying a few times before you understand. This is especially the case if the person is using a speech or voice aid.

- Tell the person if you don't understand what he/she is saying. The person will either say it another way, show you what they are talking about, spell it out verbally, write it down, use a communication device or point to letters, words or pictures on their communication board.

If the person is having difficulty understanding speech

People can have challenges understanding spoken language for many reasons and they require different types of supports.

Example: A person with a hearing loss may need a sign language interpreter. A person with aphasia may require the speaker to write down key words or show a picture of what is being talked about. A person with an intellectual disability may require the speaker to use short, simple sentences.

People who have communication disabilities may also have limited understanding simply due to the fact that the language you are speaking is not their first language. In such situations, they may require an interpreter in their native language in addition to supports for their communication disability.

General guidelines to enhance comprehension include:

- When possible, use clear, straightforward language when speaking or developing written documents as this makes it easier for everyone. Plain language is a communication style that focuses on ensuring that the

audience understands the message. It is the practice of avoiding unnecessary words, jargon, technical terms and long, ambiguous sentences. It is not baby talk.

- You can get information about plain language from www.plainlanguage.gov.

- Slow the pace of the interaction by pausing between your sentences. Allow time for the person to speak, nod, signal "yes" or use their communication board or device.

- If there is a communication assistant present, this person may rephrase what you are saying or use other strategies to support the individual in understanding what you are saying.

- Demonstrate what you are talking about by:
    - Using gestures
    - Showing objects or pointing at people
    - Writing the key words that you are saying
    - Drawing a picture or diagram

If the person is deaf or has a hearing loss

- Make sure the person is looking at you before you start talking and that he/she can see your mouth.

- Find out what the person wants to use when communicating with you. S/he may want to use his/her own amplifier or communication device or may request that you write down what you are saying.

- Speak clearly and at a moderate pace. Do not shout.

- If what you have said is not understood, say it in another way rather than repeat it.

- Upon request, arrange to have a sign language interpreter (i.e., a person who translates spoken language into sign language) or a captioner (i.e., a person who writes or types what is being said). Contact The Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) for these services.

Rob Chamberland, a web architect, uses a sign language interpreter when meeting with a client.

If the person is deaf and blind

- A person who is deafblind may require an intervenor. An intervenor provides visual and auditory information to the person using their preferred sign language. Contact the Canadian Deafblind Association, Ontario Chapter for these services.

If the person uses a communication assistant

A communication assistant is someone who interprets a person's impaired speech or assists a person who uses a communication display or device.

- Ensure that the person who accompanies an individual has been authorized to assist him/her with communication. Once you have confirmed the role, accept the person's messages as conveyed to you by the assistant.

- Speak directly to the individual, not to the assistant.

- Observe the person directing the assistant so that you know he/she is communicating and approving their messages. In some cases, an assistant may support the person selecting words or pictures on his/her display or device or putting these items into sentences. If you are unsure about a message, ask, "Is that what you wanted to say?"

- If the person does not have a communication assistant, be prepared to negotiate communication assistant services at the request of the individual. Ask the individual if s/he has a person who can assist them or a speech language pathologist who knows how s/she communicates. Contact Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada for information about communication assistants.

Special Situations

Communicating over the telephone

Find out how the person wants to communicate with you on the telephone. S/he might want to use a device or a communication assistant. Alternatively, the individual might want you to ask questions to which s/he can answer, "yes" or, "no." The person may prefer to use e-mail or fax. If you have a receptionist, ensure s/he knows how the person will communicate over the telephone.

Written communication

People with physical disabilities may have difficulty writing and may require a note-taker to transcribe or take notes. Note-takers are often available in educational settings.

Making text materials accessible

Ensure that text information is in formats that the person can access and understand. Some individuals may want information in plain language, enlarged font, electronic formats, Braille or they may require the assistance of someone who can help in reading and understanding documents.

Decision-making and consent

Depending on the type of decision to be made (e.g., health/medical, financial or personal), as well as skills and experience, most people with communication disabilities make their own decisions or, like everyone else, they might rely on others for advice.

In some special circumstances (e.g., a healthcare or legal setting), you may need to know if the person has a formal supported decision-making agreement that defines the person(s) who can assist in making decisions and a process that fully respects the individual's values, beliefs, experiences and preferences. Some individuals have a Power of Attorney whereby someone can make decisions on their behalf.

Obtaining signatures

Not being able to physically hold a pen does not mean that a person cannot approve or sign a document. People who cannot write and who understand the meaning of a document may use an alternative mode for signing. Alternatives range from an X, a stamp, a thumb-print, or their authorization of a legally-appointed person to sign on their behalf.

Privacy

Be mindful of the individual's right to privacy. While the person may rely on a support person to assist in daily activities, she/he may not want to share aspects of their personal life with that person. It is the person's responsibility to negotiate privacy agreements with their communication assistant.

However, in some situations, your organization may require a communication assistant to sign an agreement to protect yours or other people's privacy (e.g., group counseling).

Jody Schloss, a master's student at York University, types her messages when discussing finances with her bank manager.

Communicating in Essential or Emergency Situations

People with communication disabilities need to be able to communicate quickly and effectively in emergency situations with first responders such as police, health care workers, fire fighters, etc.

If the person does not have access to their own communication board or device, use "yes" and "no" questions to get information.

Example: You want to identify the source of a person's pain.

Say, "Do you feel any pain?"
When the person responds with a yes, confirm you have understood.

Say, "You told me "yes", you are in pain."
Then ask, "Where is your pain?" Wait.
If the person cannot point with a finger, hand or eyes, suggest body parts.
Say, "Does your head hurt?"
When the person responds with a "no," ask another question.

John Draper, who runs his own business educating people about accessibility issues, uses his letter board to spell out what he wants to say to a nurse at his local hospital.

For more information about communication access for first responders, see www.aac-rerc.com and click on the section called "Disaster Prep."

Where communication is of a highly significant and critical nature, (e.g., within legal, health, police, emergency contexts), organizations should consider:

1. Teaching a core group of internal staff to support communication access.

2. Having context-specific resources such as communication displays and accessible call bells. Contact Augmentative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada for training and resources.

Checklist for Communication Access

Does your organization have clear **policies**, **procedures** and **practices** to ensure that people with communication disabilities can:

- √ Use their preferred method of communicating when receiving your goods and services?
- √ Have their personal communication requirements accommodated in personal meetings, over the telephone and via written communications?
- √ Have access to sign language interpreters, captioners, note-takers, intervenors and communication assistants to be accessed upon request?
- √ Give feedback on how well their communication needs are accommodated within your organization?

Has your organization provided the following **training** and **resources** to all staff who interact with the public:

- √ General guidelines for communicating and working with people who have a range of communication disabilities?

- √ Information on how to access community resources for sign language interpreters, captioners, note-takers, intervenors, communication assistants?

Resources and Organizations

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Community Partnerships-Canada (ACCPC) provides training, resources and information about communication assistants and communication accessibility for people who use communication displays and devices. Tel: 416-444-9532.
Website: www.accpc.ca

The Assistive Devices Program from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care can provide information about communication devices and services in Ontario. Tel: 1-800-268-6021 (Toll-free in Ontario only)
In Toronto, call 416-327-8804. TTY: 1-800-387-5559.
Website: www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/adp/adp_mn.html

The Aphasia Institute, Toronto supports people who have aphasia as a result of a stroke or accident. Tel: 416-226-3636. Website: www.aphasia.ca

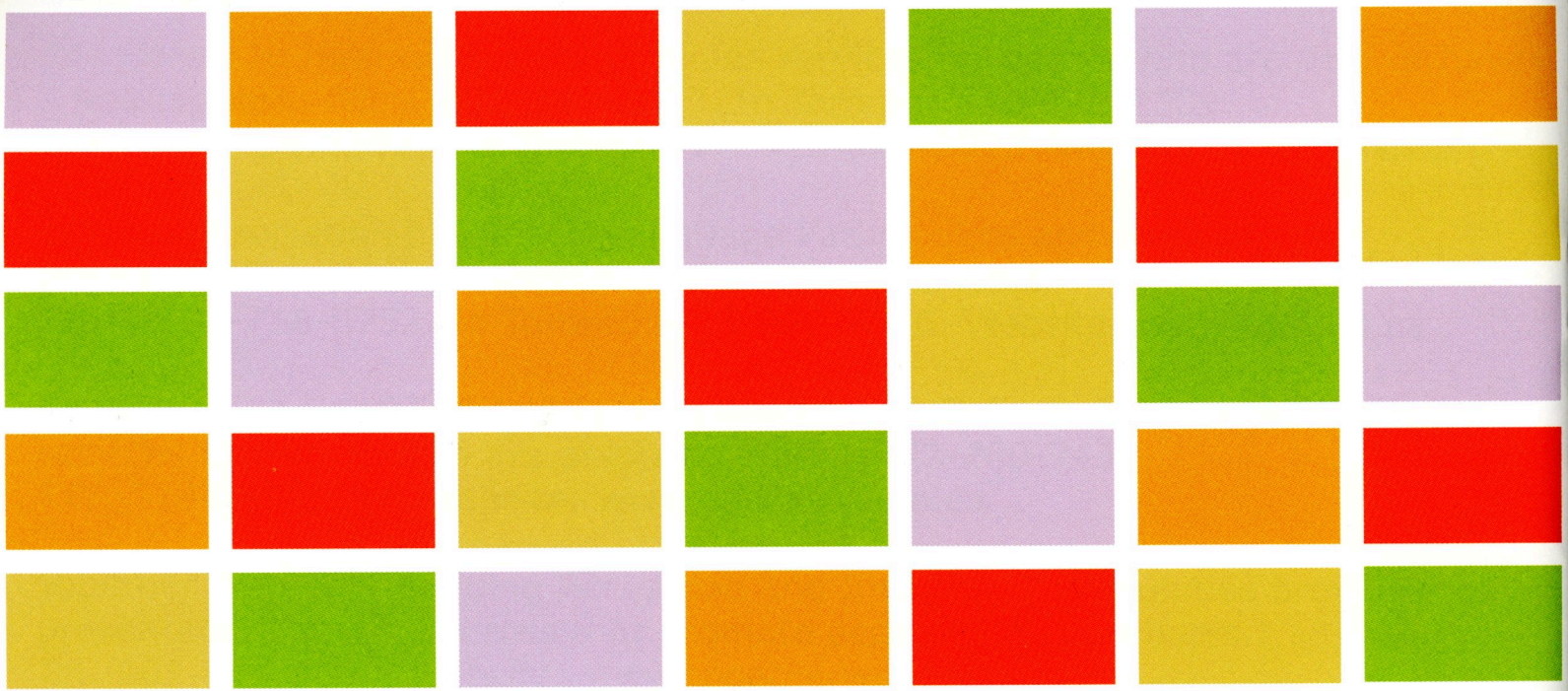
The Canadian Hearing Society provides services for people who are deaf or have a hearing loss. Tel: 1-877-347-3427. In Toronto: 416-928-2504.
TTY: 1-877-347-3429. In Toronto TTY: 416-964-0023. Website: www.chs.ca

Ontario Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists provides information on speech and language services.
Tel: 1-800-718-6752. In Toronto: 416-920-3676. Website: www.osla.on.ca

The Canadian Deafblind and Rubella Association Ontario Chapter provides services for people who are deafblind. Tel: 1-877-760-7439.
TTY: 519-759-3597. Website: www.cdbraontario.ca

Together We Rock: Building Accessible and Inclusive Communities provides presentations and resources that promote accessibility in schools.
Tel: 905-404-9590. Website: www.togetherwerock.com

International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Canadian Chapter provides information about augmentative and alternative communication. Tel: 416-385-0351. Website: www.isaac-online.org



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